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Lockdown fatigue is giving way to protests and defiance across the country

'We often hear it's a race against the variants, but I think it's also a race against complacency and rage'

Tyler Dawson

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Police struggle with protesters trying to tear down a fence outside GraceLife Church near Edmonton on Sunday, April 11, 2021. The church has been fenced off for repeated violations of COVID-19 rules. PHOTO BY JASON FRANSON/THE CANADIAN PRESS

With protests breaking out in different parts of the country, and some businesses flatly refusing to follow COVID-19 health orders, lockdown fatigue is giving way to lockdown rage more than a year into the pandemic.

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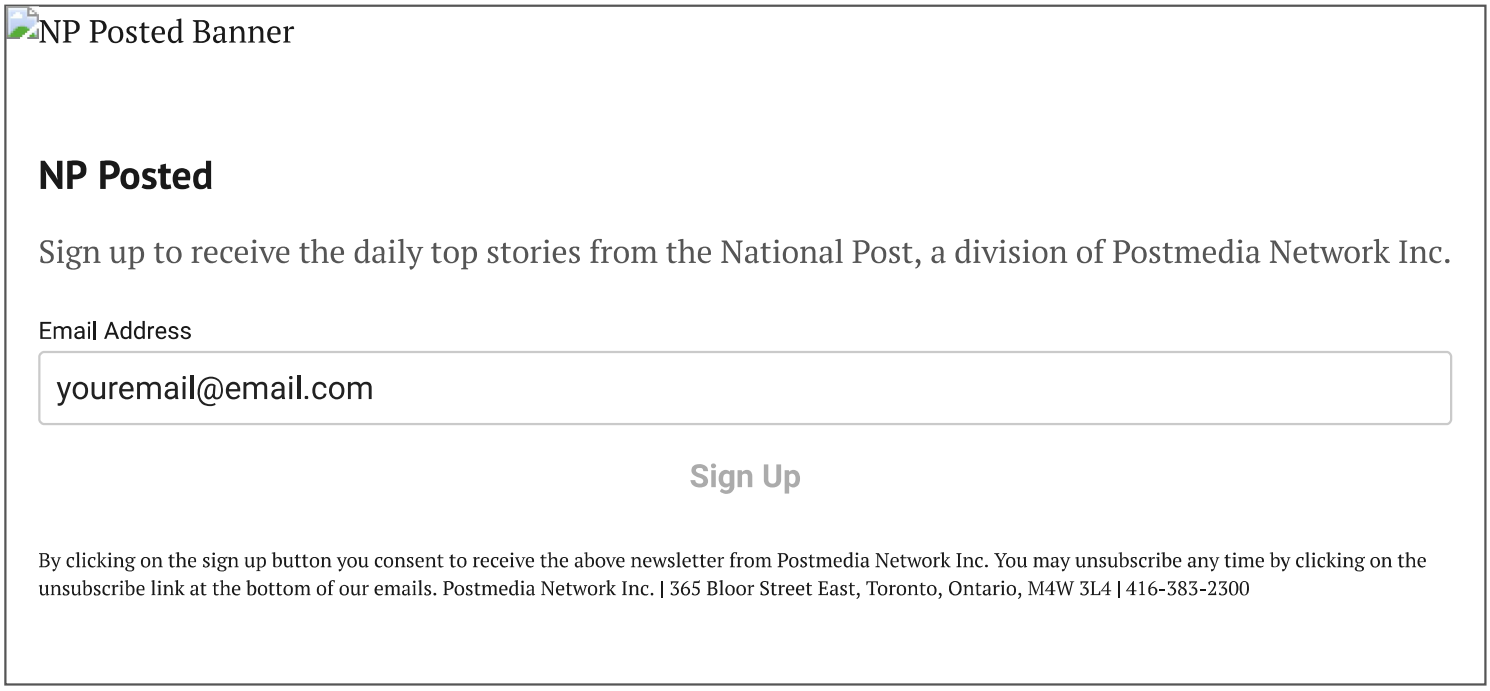
On Sunday, hundreds of people weathered the ice and the chill to protest the closure of the Edmonton-area GraceLife church that has been ignoring public health rules for months. On the other side of the country, windows were smashed and garbage torched in Old Montreal as protesters rejected the province's latest curfew rules, calling for "freedom for the young."

As the country battles the third wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, with variants spreading rapidly and the vaccine roll-out slow to catch up, governments have once again stepped up public health restrictions. In Alberta, that meant shuttering indoor dining, and capacity restrictions on indoor gatherings and retail. In Quebec, it has meant a return to an 8 p.m. curfew. In Ontario, already under stay-at-home orders, students won't return to in-person learning next week after a delayed school break.



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"We often hear it's a race against the variants, but I think it's also a race against complacency and rage," said Tim Caulfield, Canada Research Chair in Health Law and Policy, at the University of Alberta. "I believe that Canada can, ultimately Canada will come together, and we're going to win this race, but you can certainly see the tensions rising."

Clearly, people are tired of the pandemic and the restrictions, even if they are still following the rules. Recent polling on the pandemic from the Angus Reid Institute shows that 29 per cent of Canadians are “having a pretty tough time with things” at this point, while 54 per cent are “experiencing some difficulty but nothing major.”

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People take part in an anti-curfew protest in Montreal on Sunday April 11, 2021. PHOTO BY GIUSEPPE VALIANTE/THE CANADIAN PRESS

The evidence is everywhere, in casual conversations with friends and family, and at businesses defying public health orders, such as the Whistle Stop Café, in Mirror, Alta., which has refused to close despite visits from police and health officials, or the hair salon in Barrie, Ont., which also defied orders to close despite threats of fines.

Even in the corridors of power. Last week, 17 United Conservative Party members of the Alberta legislature spoke out against the most recent round of provincial restrictions in a very public airing of

internal dissent among the 63 UCP MLAs.

On Monday, Maxime Bernier, leader of the fringe People's Party of Canada, addressed a crowd at the Alberta legislature in Edmonton, where someone held a Western Independence Party flag, and protesters chanted "lock her up!" in reference to Dr. Deena Hinshaw, the province's chief medical officer of health.

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Bernier has been touring British Columbia and Alberta, calling for an end to lockdowns. He said the protest is a "ideological revolution," and railed against business closures, mask laws, curfews, and as-yet non-existent vaccine passports.

"I'm saying 'no' to 'show me your papers,'" said Bernier. "I'm saying 'yes to our freedoms, to who we are as Canadians.'"

Hundreds of people gather to take part in an anti-curfew protest in Montreal on Sunday April 11, 2021. PHOTO BY GIUSEPPE VALIANTE/THE CANADIAN PRESS

As the rally came to a close, there was a loud chant of “freedom!” in the square in front of the legislature building.

In Montreal, meanwhile, police said seven people were arrested and 107 tickets related to public health violations were given out Sunday evening to protesters.

Nationally, the RCMP said they've issued 129 fines related to the federal Quarantine Act since March 2020.

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Multiple other cities and towns across the country, including Toronto, Calgary and Vancouver, have seen protest rallies and marches, with COVID restrictions blending together with a number of public grievances. GraceLife, the church outside of Edmonton, has become a lighting rod for the far-right, both in Canada and the United States. The story has caught the attention of Fox News host Tucker Carlson, and U.S. conspiracy theorist Alex Jones, and Sunday's protest drew some notorious right-wing figures from within Canada.

"The church example has emerged as a focal point for those who are frustrated with the lockdown, and not just in Canada," said Caulfield. "Unfortunately, that kind of rhetorical strategy works."

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The question now is, how much longer politicians can hold the line? Caulfield pointed out that even though protesters are making plenty of noise, the vast majority of Canadians continue to follow public health rules.

“Most Canadians have been amazing. Most Canadians do understand how important these public health measures are,” said Caulfield. “Often, understandably, the news focuses on the other side of the equation, those who are frustrated and are acting out.”

“Just asking people over and over again to follow the restrictions isn’t enough,” said Caulfield. “And shaming people into following restrictions, also, not enough … we need to engage people, we need to listen to them.”

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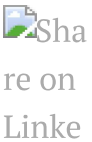
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